



Operation: "Allied Against Meth"

ROB McKENNA

Local Prosecution • Community Education • Statewide Task Force



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Greetings,

I am pleased to report that word of Operation: Allied Against Meth is spreading. As I travel the state speaking to associations, rotaries and civic groups, I am asked often about our coordinated effort to battle the meth epidemic.

We are gearing up for another busy month starting with the second meeting of the Meth Task Force next week, where each of the three subcommittees will present their draft recommendations to the group.

We've visited just about every community meth action team in the state and will be visiting Grays Harbor County before the end of the month.

DRUG ENDANGERED CHILDREN TRAINING

I recently spoke at the regional Drug Endangered Children training in Kelso. It is extremely sad that trainings like this are necessary. Almost daily, there are new reports of the increasing number of children in state custody because their parents use meth. Everyday, Assistant Attorneys General around the state represent DSHS and their clients, drug endangered children, in dependency and parental rights termination cases.

Children who are rescued from clandestine drug labs or dangerous homes need good legal representation in court, but they also need a continuum of services that begins with removal from their home.

Removal can be extremely traumatic for children, since being picked up by strangers and taken from their homes can be terrifying. They are separated from everyone they know, often don't understand what is happening to them, and they cannot bring anything with them (their toys and clothes may be contaminated with meth and its constituent chemicals). It is critical that everyone involved in the process of removing a child from a drug environment works together to ensure the smoothest, safest and most compassionate transition for these children.

These trainings are an important step toward developing guidelines that ensure all of us are doing everything possible, not only to improve their circumstances, but to minimize the terror and trauma of this kind of upheaval.

FEDERAL LEGISLATION

Last week, I joined U.S. Rep. Dave Reichert and Indiana Congressman Mark Souder, chairman of the House Drug Policy Subcommittee, for a press conference to announce proposed tougher penalties for the top traffickers of meth and those who manufacture meth on federal lands, such as national parks and forests. I took the opportunity to argue against proposed federal cuts to funding for inter-jurisdictional

drug task forces and for police officers, a position that Rep. Reichert and Rep. Souder share.

Before the announcement we toured the Pediatric Interim Care Center in Kent, a nationally recognized facility that treats infants born addicted to drugs such as cocaine, heroin and methamphetamine. PICC is the only private, non-profit center of its kind in the United States. About 60 percent of the approximately 170 babies they will treat this year will have been exposed to meth in utero.

METH'S TOLL ON THE HEALTH CARE SYSTEM

We're beginning to see some staggering data on the cost of meth to the health care system. Cities across the country are reporting huge rises in the number of emergency room visits due to methamphetamine. Statistics show that Seattle has seen a 77 percent increase from 1995-2002. Other cities, including Baltimore and Newark, report increases of over 500 percent.

In addition, meth lab accidents are wreaking financial havoc on burn treatment facilities. A recent Newsweek article reported an alarming rise in the cost of treating burn victims. Vanderbilt University Burn Center in Nashville now attributes as many as one third of its burn cases to meth.

An example of what they're facing involved a patient burned in a meth explosion in Kentucky. The cost of his treatment totaled \$553,000, but only \$110,000 of the bill was recovered from Medicaid.

The burn unit director said that if they continue to take on the financial burden of \$5 to \$10 million per year in uncompensated care for these cases, they may not have a burn unit five or ten years from now.

Another huge problem is prison dental care. Prison health authorities in recent years have been dealing with an onslaught of medical problems related to the dental health of meth users who end up in prison.

One dentist said that eight years ago when he first began treating meth-related dental illness – "meth mouth" – his colleagues couldn't imagine what he was describing. People as young as their early twenties have lost most or all of their teeth; and suffer pain and a range of infections resulting from rotten, swollen and abscessed teeth and gums.

While on meth, they didn't notice it was a problem, but when they end up in the corrections system, they require extensive medical treatment. A Minnesota prison reported 690 such cases in the first quarter of 2004. That number has skyrocketed to 1,238 cases in the first quarter of this year. The prison's cost of treating these problems has nearly doubled since 2001.

Law enforcement, hospitals, local courts and treatment facilities are all feeling the affects of meth.

EDUCATION

We have scheduled presentations with Lead on America, a community-based anti-meth education organization, at high schools and middle schools in Spokane,

Ferndale, Olympia and Kittitas County. We are also planning educational presentations to parents during the corresponding evenings of some of these visits, in partnership with the local Meth Action Teams.

We are hoping to visit a few more schools before the end of the year, so if a high school or middle school in your area might be interested in one of these presentations, please contact AGO Public Information Officer Sarah Frost at sarahf1@atg.wa.gov.

UPCOMING EVENTS

September 29 The Meth Task Force will hold its second meeting from 9:00 a.m. to noon in the Senate Rules Committee Meeting Room in the State Capitol Building in Olympia.

October 5 I'll be addressing the Washington Association of County Officials and the Vancouver Rotary regarding methamphetamine.

October 11 I'll be talking to the Bellevue Rotary about clandestine meth labs.

Thanks, as always, to everyone involved in the fight against meth. Please don't hesitate to contact us if we can be of assistance.

Sincerely,

Rob McKenna

Attorney General